

REVIEWS

THE COST OF HEALTH. By Ffrangcon Robert, M.D. (Pp. 193 + 7. 16s.).
London : Turnstile Press. 1952.

EVERY now and then in the whirligig of life it is necessary for humanity to stop and ask itself where it is going. This is true not only of mankind in general, but also of the professions and particularly, since it holds a peculiarly intimate position, of the medical profession. Though the publishers commend this book to the layman it is of even more interest and indeed of fundamental importance to the members of our profession. In the last few years we have seen and taken part in a revolution in medicine. The nation has taken notice of what we have to contribute to its concept of the Welfare State, and in a flurry of Parliamentary activity, of B.M.A. conferences, of arguments which on the whole have been concerned more with economics than with professional status or ideology, the new state of medical nationalisation has been born. The book deals with the consequences of that act. The fallacy of so-called planning on schemes of such magnitude is exposed. The £170,000,000 estimate of Beveridge in 1942, the £230,000,000 estimate of Bevan in 1948, have in the experience of three years been found to be mere guesses, and Parliament has had finally to limit the expenditure on health to £400,000,000. In other words, medicine is rationed, and it is only within the framework of that ration that diagnosis, treatment and medical advance can be perpetuated. The humanitarian outlook of the doctor in the past has not been questioned, but now it becomes necessary to strip aside emotionalism and wishful thinking and to re-orientate the aims of the profession. Where money is scarce is it better to spend it prolonging life through palliation but not cure of the degenerative diseases, or to maintain the general health of the community by providing better houses and a reasonable standard of living? For the doctor it is a bitter choice. "We are rapidly approaching the time when humanitarian demands can be satisfied only by inroads upon our resources prejudicial to our standard of living, when the claims of physical health will conflict with the claims of economic health." All this is largely the result of the advance of medical science. Since the discovery of insulin there has been an ever-increasing cost of ill-health. The advance of medicine as a science has resulted not in a simplification of disease but in an ever-growing complexity. The "complete" doctor of the last century has become subdivided into an ever-growing number of specialists, each speciality in turn conceiving the need for more and more technicians, until now in Addenbrooke's hospital every two patients require the services of three full-time people. Is all this technical help really necessary? If technicians on a lower scale of salary do so much of the essential work are so many doctors required? If they are required is it essential that there should be such a differential rate of pay? These are problems to which the medical profession must give its mind, and its future depends largely upon how they are solved. No one likes ill-health, but when medicine is nationalised the economic value of the doctor to the state becomes a matter of importance, an importance which is linked with the productive capacity of the state and hence related to the number of strikes, the will to work of its people, and to the exercise of restraint and unselfishness by every individual citizen. There is no limit to the possible advance of medicine. The abolition of disease is an unattainable objective. Into this paradox has been thrust the inescapable logic of a limited expenditure. What is to be the solution for the medical profession? Some solution must be found if our traditions and ideology are to remain inviolate.

Every doctor must read this book. Medical organisations must consider the problems posed by it. Analytical as it is the answer to its questions has not been found. J. H. B.